REFORMERS IN AN EDEN IN THE JERSEY HILLS

Members of the Colony of Free Acres Go About in Sandals and Live Up to Their Theories—A Dance in the Firelight and Courting of an Enthusiastic Single Taxer by a Socialist

A Tent Household at Free Acres

A Typical Free Acres Bungalow

By the Camp Fire

NO HAT. No hairpins. No corsets. No hobble skirt, nor pannier skirt, nor check reined, back strapped or undergirt skirt skirt at all, in fact. And no shoes. And no stockings. Instead, a free and sufficient costume of blouse, bloomers and sandals. So the women of Free Acres clothe themselves, and the men's clothes are quite as loose and easy, if not becoming. And freedom of dress is only the first of the pleasant freedoms of Free Acres.

For while the actual Free Acres lies in a hidden crease of the Jersey hills, in spirit the place is a long way out on the hill road to Eden, washed with sun and wind and calm, and its citizens live out their theories in the full view of all their fellows. A day in the colony is sometimes very funny, but it is always pleasant.

Free Acres is a real place, built on the red soil of Jersey and neighbored by respectability and substantial towns, Plainfield, Summit and the pretty villages that are strung along the main line trolley, where the houses are abloom with crimson ramblers by day, and with homeward commuted stenographers after sundown. But Free Acres lies 200 feet nearer heaven than all of them, and is not an easy place to reach, for no trail will take you there; there is no trolley line near it and it has no telephone.

The mail comes as far as a tin box a quarter of a mile away. There is a single track of the old Passaic and Delaware Railroad which runs as far—but after all these hill roads were made for exploring, and if you are likely to enjoy Free Acres you will not mind asking your way from the friendly people you meet on the road.

Four years ago the colony was founded to illustrate the theory of the single tax, much as Arden was founded in Delaware in the quiet years before the Sinclairs made it famous. You must say "Single-tax," by the way, not "Single Tax" or "single tax," if you would have a real single taxer take you for an educated person. Spoken so the word rolls trippingly off the tongue with the same effect of friendly familiarity that comes from saying "sofmore" instead of "sophomore" to a college man, of putting the accent on the "Broad" of "Broadway."

They are far enough from the single tax now out at Free Acres. A few defenders of that faith still persist, but in a minority. Indeed no test is applied to candidates. It is not even true that a vow of poverty is exacted upon admission to the fellowship, though the practice of poverty in worldly goods is universal. All told there are now a dozen families settled for the summer on the land. They are of different sorts of course, but everybody has some theory or other for reforming the world. And the way hit or miss neighbors are mated out there seems almost too good to be true.

The smartest of the bungalows, for instance, belongs to a middle aged widow and her young daughter, both of them in the service of one of the great Protestant missionary societies. Their house is a trim one room shack painted a dull dark green with a vegetable garden behind a deep sleeping porch in front and beds of hollyhocks and phlox and sweet william and others of the gay old flowers that bloom in the deep, grape grown gardens of Salem and Newburyport.

Near by lives a Catholic family, father, mother and four children, in a tree shaded cottage with the luxury of a pump and well of its own. And in the next lot is the tent of a pair of young anarchists who felt themselves called upon to spurn the wordly or formal marriage ceremony and set up housekeeping without it.

Plainly there are possibilities in such a situation. It was some time before the anarchists were looked upon with favor: but when a barelegged little girl anarchist comes to your pump every morning with an eight quart bucket in her hand and a cascade of deep auburn curls shaken down around her shoulders and gives you a gay "Good morning" and a wealth of pretty thanks for the water it is not in human nature to be always resentful.

It is a solemn fact that the little Catholic children and the little anarchist children once got into a fight over whether there was a God or not. And it was a very curious feeling, not wholly unpleasant, that a visitor had when he came upon a young lady of 6, barefoot and dressed in boy's clothes, who was playing with dolls under some sumach bushes, and asked her name. For she looked at him with two eyes of a dim and lovely lilac blue and answered sweetly:

"Revolt."

There was also an Englishman by the name of Dekker, who built in the middle of the big lower field. He was a Fabian socialist; he had been spoken to on the street by Bernard Shaw when he was living in London and he used to play the flute at hours of the night when his neighbors wanted to go to sleep. At first he lived in a tent. Then he brought some sacks of cement out from town and cast a concrete floor in the ground, doing all the work himself, and over it built the frame of a shack.

He covered the walls with tarred paper and then attached strips of earth every two feet, holding the soil up with chicken wire netting. The roof he covered with a thick layer of earth. He planted daisies and vines and roses and a few geraniums in his hanging gardens and then settled down to live in the place.

It took all his forenoons to keep his house watered. Twelve buckets a day was the allowance, and the brook was a quarter of a mile away. Most of the plants died. There was a little apple tree which Dekker planted on top of a sort of small prayer tower at one corner. One night in a thunderstorm the tree came down through the roof, root, branch and five bushels of earth, and landed on the foot of the Englishman's spruce bunk. It did not quite break his legs, but the next week he gave up his lease and went back to town. The shell of his shack still stands, with most of the earth still in place and the concrete floor as tight as a drum. The colonists call the ruin "Dekker's Folly."

The ground at Free Acres is leased, by the way, not owned by the dwellers. There are thirty-odd acres in the colony, which are held by the Free Acres Association, a New Jersey corporation, and leased to members for a term of ninety-nine years in one acre or quarter acre lots. The usual holding is a quarter of an acre, for which the tenant pays a single tax—not rent, mind you—of $3 a year. Then he puts up whatever he pleases in the way of living quarters.

About half the colonists live in tents, usually of pretty substantial make, set up on light timber framework, with board floors well above the ground. The rest live in bungalows, the largest of them containing two rooms and all of the lightest construction. All have wide sleeping porches and plentiful guards of mosquito netting.

Not a few colonists, even of the bungalow dwellers, do their cooking outdoors over campfires of the good old fashioned kind, with a kettle swung from a cross stick between two crotched uprights. There are wood stoves in some of the bungalows, though oil and alcohol are preferred for hot weather fuel. Coal is unknown.

The life of Free Acres centres around the inn. It is not much of an inn as inns are judged where automobile traffic is fast and frequent. There is a scale of prices published on the bulletin board, namely, 25 cents for breakfast, 35 cents for dinner or supper, 50 cents for a night's lodging. But the private hospitality of the citizens is large, and up to date no one has asked for entertainment at the scheduled rates.

Still the inn flourishes in the eyes of the residents and it is in good hands. It is an old farmhouse of about five rooms, furnished with a profusion of blue china and not much of anything else except good nature and the right kind of camping out philosophy. But these last are there in plenty, and when the butter runs low it is easy enough to laugh and eat cheese instead.

The bulletin board, by the way, is nailed to a great sycamore which stands in the doorway. It is a lordly tree, a good four feet through and nearly a hundred feet high, and the community swing and the fire alarm also hang there. The fire alarm serves too to gather the citizens for the frequent Sunday afternoon town meetings. It is a wagon tire with a break in it, akin to the locomotive tire alarm that is the favorite of the volunteer firemen and the terror of womenfolk everywhere.

The Sunday town meeting is usually the event of the week. Every resident of Free Acres who is over 18 years of age is entitled to a voice and a vote without regard to sex, color or previous condition, and the absentees are few. Chairs are brought out from the inn and placed in a circle on the dancing platform for the voting members. Guests, dogs, children and bashful members sit on the platform edge and listen. The topics discussed are those debated at any town meeting: roads, water, the public health, digging the swimming hole in the brook, for instance, and who ought to take the two humps out of the South Field.

After the town meeting there is usually a horse meeting. The Free Acres Horse Owners Association has a suspicious sound. It might be that these quiet seeming people had a racetrack hidden somewhere on their land and were making book in violation of the law. It might be, but it does not seem likely when you look at them—and when you look at the horse your mind is at rest. The horse has ears, a tail and bones. The bones are his chief distinction. They would make a complete set for any horse. So you gather from hearing the colonists talk. A colonist announced one night that he had counted 217 bones in the horse and that every one had been a bone of contention at some meeting of the horse owners.

It would be unkind to make fun of the horse—his name used to be Teddy, but for some reason that has fallen into disuse in the last few months—if it were not that one of his chief uses to the colonists was to be made fun of. The lively dissensions of the horse meetings have developed the horse into a legendary figure of unearthly shape. To look at him he does not seem to be a racer, it is true, but he appears a very sober, righteous horse, no more melancholy than the general run of country horseflesh.

The basement of the inn, which is half open on the down hill side, is the common meeting place for rainy weather. With a big fireplace, a smooth cement floor, the hewn beams of the floor overhead and plenty of chairs and benches of the camping varieties, it makes a welcome retreat for a stormy summer night or for October gatherings. It is named Frank Stephens Hall in honor of the man who founded the single tax colony at Arden.

But for the most part life at Free Acres means life out of doors. The cooking may be done inside the shack, but you will probably eat behind the mosquito netting on the wide porch, and you will sleep out there, and the rest of the time you will be lying around in the sun or exploring the trails about the hills. And evenings in the fresh, cool hours of the dewfall you will be sitting out on the ground, with pipes and ponchos and blankets and pillows and citronella oil, discussing the class struggle or Bernard Shaw or love.

The gathering ground at the inn is below the big sycamore, at a place where a hammock may be comfortably swung between two tall locusts. It fronts eastward toward the moonrise, and you can see the pale flare of the Plainfield lights further to the south, and the mosquitoes are not very thick.

It is queer how soon you get used to the smell of citronella when the company is good and the talk lively. It does keep mosquitoes off. It is also worth noting that up at Free Acres the mosquitoes are of a puny and degenerate stock, a feeble folk, foolish and easily caught, and in all these respects are unlike the pests of lowland Jersey, which never know when they have had enough.

But the moonrise has other uses than lighting gatherings of intellectuals up at the inn. There was another widow who lived in a one room cottage down by the lower field. There was also a reformed chauffeur who had lately taken up civil engineering and was hoping to get a job in the fall.

At the time of the June moonrise they used to sit with the others up at the inn and join in the general talk. By the time the July moon came around they had found the widow's porch a better gazing ground. But when the August moon was in the sky the chauffeur appeared once more at the inn's gatherings, and the widow was not with him. Naturally he was asked what was the matter.

To a sympathetic friend he poured out the whole sad story. He and the lady were devoted to each other. But there was a barrier between them. He was a socialist, she a single taxer, and it was evident that no true union of souls could ever spring from such a match. And it was mighty hard to give her up.

The friend saw the way out. There were two things that might be done, he said. The chauffeur might become a single taxer, or the widow might be made a socialist. All things considered, he thought they had better convert the widow. The chauffeur said he thought so too.

So it happened that the next night he went wooing with three volumes on "Property, Its Origin and Development" under one arm, and under the other Walt Whitman's "Leaves of Grass." For three weeks the lovers read a chapter on property every night, and then when the September moon was new they finished off the job with "Leaves of Grass." Thanksgiving week, when the chauffeur had got his engineering job, and they were both back in town, the lady joined the socialist party and the next day they were married.

There is one feature of the life of Free Acres that will never be forgotten by those who have had the good luck to see it. The dancing platform, the same where town meetings are held, lies close under the porch of the inn on the levelled ground at the door of Frank Stephens Hall. It is a good sized floor of rough planks, raised a couple of feet from the ground and flanked by a walk and a low retaining wall.

Some one had a mandolin the night the writer was at Free Acres and a dance was proposed. The dancers cried out at the lantern on the inn porch, so the colonists built up a bright wood fire on each of the two walls to give them light. The dancers were the wife of the anarchist, the wife of an artist from the south field and two of the younger girls not yet out of their teens.

They would have danced barefoot, they said, but the floor was too rough. But they had a sheet apiece, borrowed from the inn, and their loose, every day clothes could hardly be bettered for dancing costumes. It was a dance that they made themselves—picked up from Isadora Duncan, one of the girls declared, while the anarchist woman was certain she had learned the step from the Indian women out West.

But the truth of the matter is, as most of the spectators must have known, that they got the dance from somewhere close at hand, from the mind of some wild and maidenly presence that stirred and swayed in the old sycamore or up among the limbs of the locusts and drew the dancers on in the pulse of the rhythm, step after joyous step. It was all girlish and buoyant, with the mandolin only singing a tuneful undersong to the hard, swift beat of sandals on the boards and brown bare arms lifting in pure, wild, metrical gladness, hair all loose and afloat and great, fluttering swirls of drapery stained tawny orange in the firelight. And afterward the mandolin started a waltz and then all danced together.

ODD FRUIT, THE DURIAN

The East furnishes in the durian one of the strangest of fruits. It has been called "the king of fruits, as the orange is the queen," but there are many who entertain no liking for it.

There is this difficulty about the durian, its consumption presents the same obstacle to enjoyment as a ripe cheese. To eat a durian one must first overcome his sense of smell. The odor of the durian suggests Limburger cheese, onion sauce, brown sherry and other incongruities. It has also been compared to the smell of a limekiln in full operation.

The Malays are excessively fond of the fruit, and those Europeans whose sense of smell is not overdelicate contend that the durian is like rich buttery custard flavored wtih almonds.

A British officer at Penang once dined a member of Parliament about to leave for home. Among other delicacies an overripe durian was placed upon the table. The guest, on being pressed to partake of it, declined, with this remark:

"It may have been very good last season, but if you will excuse me, I would rather not venture on it now."

A learned man in the East once tried to confute an atheist. He bade him reflect, just as an acorn fell upon the unbeliever's head, that if the acorn had been a pumpkin, it would have cracked his skull.

"See, my friend," said the learned man, "the evidence is not only of a Creator, but of a beneficial Providence, in the fact that only small nuts and fruits are permitted to grow on trees."

The reasoning is contradicted by facts. The durian is as large as a man's head, and is covered with sharp spines. It grows upon a large tree, somewhat similar to the walnut. When ripe it falls, and if it should strike any one the chances are that it would inflict damage. The natives, knowing the danger of a blow from a falling durian, stretch nets under the trees in populous places, so that the fruit may be caught as it falls.